DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 407 881 FL 801 162

AUTHOR	Wiley, Terrence G.
TITLE	Myths about Language Diversity and Literacy in the United States. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education, Washington, DC. BBB31500
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-LE-97-01
PUB DATE	Apr 97
NOTE	4p.
CONTRACT	RR93002010
AVAILABLE FROM	NCLE, 1118 22nd Street N.W., Washington, DC 20037.
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Bilingual Education; *Cultural Pluralism; *English; English (Second Language); Immersion Programs; *Language Attitudes; Language of Instruction; *Language Role; Limited English Speaking; *Literacy; Minority Groups; Public Opinion
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Four common myths or misconceptions in the United States about language are discussed, drawing on historical evidence and contemporary data. These myths are that: (1) the predominance of English and English literacy is threatened; (2) English literacy is the only literacy worth noting; (3) English illiteracy is high because language minorities are not as eager to learn English and assimilate as prior generations were; and (4) the best way to promote English literacy is to immerse children and adults in English-only instruction. It is concluded that the persistence of the myth of English monolingualism in the United States reflects the belief that English is the only language that counts, and the mentality that language diversity is a problem rather than a resource. Most national literacy estimates are based solely on English abilities, tending to inflate the perception that there is a literacy crisis. Contains 18 references. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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ED 407 881

ERIC

Digest

National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education

Myths about Language Diversity and Literacy in the United States

by
Terrence G. Wiley
California State University , Long Beach

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FL 801 162

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April 1997
EDO-LE-97-01

Myths about Language Diversity and Literacy in the United States

by Terrence G. Wiley
California State University, Long Beach

A number of popular myths surround discussions of language diversity and literacy in the United States and shed light on the education research, policy, and practice directed at these issues. This digest examines four of these myths or misconceptions, drawing on both historical evidence and contemporary data.

Myth 1. The predominance of English and English literacy is threatened.

English has been the dominant language of the United States since its founding, and there appears to be little reason to assume that its status will be eclipsed in the foreseeable future. U.S. Census data indicate that, in 1990, there were approximately 32 million speakers of languages other than English in this country—13.8% of the total population. Only 1.8 million (less than 6%) of this group did not speak any English at all. Based on these data, it is clear that English is overwhelmingly the majority language. However, the presence of nearly 32 million individuals who speak languages other than English indicates that the United States is most appropriately described as a multilingual nation in which English is the dominant language.

This country has always been linguistically diverse. Although the dominance of English was established at the time of the first U.S. Census in 1790, estimates of the ethnic origins of the population indicate language diversity even at that time. According to Pitt (1976), roughly half of the population were of English origin; nearly 19% were of African origin; 12% were Scotch or Scotch Irish; and Irish accounted for about 3% of the total. People of Dutch, French, and Spanish origin represented an aggregate 14%; Native Americans were largely ignored by the first U.S. Census. Through the mid-nineteenth century, a high percentage of immigrants were from predominantly English-speaking areas. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, the majority of immigrants spoke languages other than English. In 1910, there were 92 million people in the United States. Some 13 million people age ten or older were foreign born; 23% of those did not speak English (Luebke, 1980, p. 2).

Some population researchers and policymakers note with alarm that recent immigration has reached historic highs. Although it is true that there are now more foreign-born residents in the United States than ever before, this is not the only relevant point of comparison to immigration historically. It is instructive to examine the percentage of foreign born in the total U.S. population.

Between 1970 and the late 1990's, the percentage of foreign born has risen markedly. The most recent statistics show that in 1996, 9.3% of the U.S. population were foreign born (Branigan, 1997). However, the high mark this century (14.7% foreign born in 1910) is still far above current numbers.

Myth 2. English literacy is the only literacy worth noting.

Although millions of people in the United States are literate in languages other than English, their competence in those languages is often ignored. Therefore, *literacy* often becomes confused with *English literacy*. According to Macías (1990), there are three patterns of literacy among language minority groups in the United States: (1) native language literacy; (2) second language literacy (usually in English), which implies no native language literacy; and (3) biliteracy, literacy in two languages (typically in one's native language and in English). Nonliteracy (i.e., no literacy in any language) is also a possibility.

Even though literacy in languages other than English is rarely surveyed, it is not uncommon. Thus, claims made regarding the extent of illiteracy (meaning not literate in English) among language minorities must be reevaluated, and the assumption that English literacy is the only literacy that counts must be seen as reflective of the dominant ideology of English monolingualism. For the elderly, for recent immigrants, and for those who have lacked opportunities to study English, being able to use their native language provides immediate opportunities for social participation. For indigenous peoples, native language literacy provides a way to preserve languages and cultures and to reverse language loss (see Fishman, 1991).

Further, limited oral proficiency in English is commonly confused with illiteracy. Some individuals read and write in English but may not speak it well; conversely, some who are fluent orally in English are not literate in English.

Myth 3. English illiteracy is high because language minorities are not as eager to learn English and assimilate as prior generations were.

A common criticism aimed at recent immigrants is that they are disinclined to learn English or acquire literacy in English because of their loyalty to their native languages and cultures. It is also argued that recent non-English-speaking immigrants are different from those of a century ago who, it is believed, readily surrendered their languages and cultures. However, a study by Wyman (1993) of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European immigrants reveals that a high percentage of European immigrants emigrated back to their homelands. As now, millions of immigrants returned home while millions more remained here, to become either bilingual or bicultural or to assimilate into the English-speaking dominant culture.

What, then, of the current language situation in this country? Are individuals who speak languages other than English really reluctant to learn English? Crawford (1992) notes that in California on the day that Proposition 63 (a proposal to make English the official language of California) passed, "more than 40,000 adults were on waiting lists for English as a second language (ESL) instruction in Los Angeles alone" (p. 17). Further, data from programs across the United States,

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compiled in 1996 and published in *NCLE Notes* (The waiting game, 1996), pointed to ESL program waiting lists numbering in the thousands and waiting periods extending to years. For example, in Seattle, the King County Literacy Coalition reported 3,000 adults on a waiting list; in New York, 1,100 were on a list for a program at a library; in Brockton, Massachusetts, the average wait was two to three years; and, in Dallas, a literacy council cited 6,000 people on a one-year waiting list.

Myth 4. The best way to promote English literacy is to immerse children and adults in English-only instruction.

One of the more enduring misconceptions is that raising children bilingually confuses them and inhibits their cognitive development. This misconception, bolstered by several generations of flawed research (see Hakuta, 1986), continues to underlie much of the opposition to bilingual education and has resulted in generations of language minority parents being admonished not to speak to children in their native language at home, even when parents have little facility in English.

It is also often argued that the best way to promote literacy is to push people into English-only immersion programs. However, again, neither the historical record nor the research supports this view. The most extreme attempt to implement an English-only education program began after the Civil War when the U.S. government pursued an aggressive Indian deculturation program. According to Spring (1994), deculturation involved "replacing the use of native languages with English, destroying Indian customs, and teaching allegiance to the U.S. government" (p. 18). Among the strategies used in the boarding schools where the children were sent "was an absolute prohibition on Native American children speaking their own languages, and those that did were humiliated, beaten, and had their mouths washed with lye soap" (Norgren & Nanda, 1988, p. 186). In spite of these practices, Weinberg (1995) notes that "Indian children were notoriously slow learners of the English language" (p. 206) and lessons of deculturation were learned more readily than those related to instruction in reading.

Current research on bilingual education for children (see, for example, Baker, 1996; Goldenberg, 1996; Merino & Lyons, 1990) and for adults (see Meléndez, 1990) indicates that the bilingual education approach is generally more effective than the English-only approach if learners are put into comparable programs with comparable resources. Further, children taught in their native language develop higher levels of proficiency in *that* language than those who are directly immersed in English, and bilingualism and biliteracy are "positive outcome[s] of any educational program" (Goldenberg, 1996, p. 10). Even critics of bilingual education such as Rossell and Baker (1996) suggest that language minority children should be seen as "an opportunity to develop bilingual adults" (p. 35).

State- and federally-funded bilingual education programs, however, reach only a fraction of eligible students. Three quarters of limited English proficient students receive ESL instruction, while only one third to one half of these students receive any instruction in their native language (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997, p. 13).

Conclusion

The persistence of the myth of English monolingualism in this country reflects the belief that English is the only language that counts and the mentality that language diversity is a problem rather than a resource. Most national literacy estimates in the United States are based solely on English abilities, and this tends to inflate the perception that there is a literacy crisis. In order to promote English literacy and biliteracy, the extent and implications of language diversity in the United States need to be understood, and literacy in *any* language needs to be viewed as a resource, rather than as a liability.

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This digest was adapted from Chapter 2 of *Literacy and Language Diversity in the United States* (Wiley, T.G. 1996. McHenry, IL & Washington, DC: Delta Systems and Center for Applied Linguistics). (Available from Delta Systems at 1-800-323-8270.)

The National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education (NCLE) is operated by the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) with funding from the U.S. Department of Education (ED), Office of Educational Research and Improvement, under contract no. RR 93002010. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of ED.

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